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Autobiography & Memoir

Just Beneath My Skin: Autobiography and Self-Discovery
Patricia Foster
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"Writing autobiography allows me to open up a vein of self-scrutiny," writes the author of this startlingly honest account of one woman's quest for self-knowledge. From the open vein flows a personal attempt to unravel the constructs of identity in relation to gender, class, and ethnicity.

The book is a series of essays, organized into three distinct parts, in which Foster defines herself according to her social, political, and historical experience. "Inside the Girls' Room" examines Foster's upbringing in rural Alabama during the1950s-70s, describing the contradictory ideals of womanhood advocated by the culture. "Inside the Writing Room" explores the topic of writing itself and the value of autobiography in a literary climate that eschews confessional work. "Inside my Skin" is a quest for cultural identity within the realms of race and class.

Foster is an award-winning writer and associate professor in the MFA program in nonfiction at the University of Iowa. Her work includes the novel *All the Lost Girls* and her short stories and essays have been widely published. She is editor or co-editor of several collections of personal essays that deal with women's issues and grief recovery: *Minding the Body*, *Sister to Sister*, and *The Healing Circle*.

This book closely examines the dichotomy between the social mores of Foster's upbringing amongst "Fifties Southern Gentility" and her own burgeoning identity, between the person she was expected to be and her true self. It was a "complicated labyrinth, a maze of conflicting rules about what a woman can be."

Foster found herself having to "conform to a contradictory code of feminine behavior, a set of terms that utterly baffled me." Her well-meaning parents anticipated their daughters' future need to negotiate both the professional and domestic worlds and so they raised them "to be both competitive and nurturing, confident and self-effacing, ambitious and nonassertive, friendly and inaccessible, flirty and asexual."

Foster concludes that her ambiguous gender identification is the result of her and her sister's social education as "honorary sons, ambitious boys hiding in dresses." She says she never "thought of myself as a woman" and describes how during her adolescence she often felt like a "fish on a hook" caught in an inevitable paradox: "how to pursue ambition while retaining feminine beauty and charm."

The author revisits her beloved old housekeeper, Ora, to better understand the political and social divide of race in her native Alabama. She draws a comparison between Ora and her mother who, despite belonging to the same economic class, experienced the kind of social mobility from which Ora was excluded because of her race.

Foster's style is poetic and fluid. She accompanies her friend Keri to the University of Tennessee to investigate an arts program: "I followed her thick braid as if it was an umbilical cord that might connect me to a more viable life." The language is lyrical and in places deeply layered in meaning. Foster's words are handpicked to reflect at times a stifling sense of stasis brought on by conflicting choices as well as a constant desire for rebirth or deliverance to another life.

Post-feminist readers will likely find Foster's search for gender identity strikingly similar to their own. The same confusion and contradictions exist today, which makes this book relevant across generations. It is illuminating for both sexes in understanding not just the resultant behavior but the motivation and often confusing directives that women feel they must follow in order to develop identities compatible with their situation in life.

When examining gender roles, Foster cannot help but look at her mother's life. She confesses to the reader that as a child she wished that her mother would stop busying herself with middle-class distractions. A deeper understanding of this behavior exposes more than just a woman with a busy domestic life: "Beneath her hurry and bustle lay a pool of rage, a fury so thick, so hot, it would burn at the touch."

Foster ponders the nebulous meaning of "charm," the one prerequisite for every middle-class Southern girl brought up in the fifties: "Now I think of 'charm' as the movement that feminism displaced." It was a code by which girls were socialized and it is this code that she attempts to break through in-depth deconstruction of her past.

Foster's personal account shows what was happening "just beneath her skin," the underlying confusion created by having to conform to a dominant culture that denies the inner self the freedom to express identity free from gender constraints. The author uses autobiography as the ultimate expression of self and through it is able to ultimately own her identity.